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webster ('web-stər) n. one who weaves or unites

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webster ('web-stər) *n.* one who weaves or unites

Taylor Wilcox

23 April 2015

Research in American History

Dr. Tom Mach

Historiography

The person of Noah Webster is typically remembered in connection with the dictionary he created, a version of which is still produced today. His life's work also included producing several textbooks, spellers, and readers, as well his influence and work with several Founding Fathers. Out of all the works he produced, his 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* can indeed be considered his greatest achievement. Though the work of Webster is universally celebrated, there is little agreement among historians about the motivations behind his work.

Some historians claim that religion was the major motivation for Webster's work, because during the Second Great Awakening, Noah Webster became a professing Christian.¹ Historian Richard Rollins cites this life event as the source of Webster's passion for language and education. He argues that while Webster's "buoyant nationalism dissolved,"² his faith remained steady. He uses the morality lessons found in Webster's readers and the Biblically based definitions in his dictionaries to support this conclusion. While there is validity to this point, it is certainly not the most important motivation behind Webster's work. In fact, some of the spellers and readers that contain these morality lessons and Biblical references were written and published before Webster's conversion. Also, because of the religious heritage of the United States, such references and lessons were common and expected. Though some at this time were Deists, being influenced by the same Enlightenment ideals that were so instrumental in

¹ Richard M. Rollins, *The Long Journey of Noah Webster* (Philadelphia: University of

² Richard M. Rollins, "Words as Social Control: Noah Webster and the Creation of the American Revolution," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Autumn 1976): 417, <http://www.jstor.org/library/cedarville.edu/stable/271538> (accessed January 25, 2015).

the establishment of the nation, Americans still “believed that religion provided the only viable basis for civilization.”³ Webster’s inclusion of these religious ideals does not sufficiently prove his motivation for revising and unifying the American English language.

Most of the monographs about Webster’s linguistic work are based around the concept of nationalism. Historians quote Webster as saying and writing many arguments in support of nationalism. The term “nationalism” can have many implications, however, and there is a tendency to misconstrue the purpose of these discussions. One scholar, Eve Kornfeld, claims that Webster’s works were “designed as testaments to American linguistic superiority.”⁴ This makes Webster and the American people seem haughty in light of their newfound independence. It is true that “Webster preached that America should stand on its own feet and never accept the hegemony of England, France, or any other nation,”⁵ but many writings about Webster portray him as a man who encouraged hatred of Great Britain and feelings of American superiority. In reality, Webster’s nationalistic feelings were aimed primarily at creating a national culture that would help the new nation withstand their differences and tensions. For the purposes of this paper, the term “patriotism” will be used to describe the anti-British sentiments and feelings of American superiority that do not accurately depict Webster’s mindset or intents. The term “nationalism,” on the other hand, will refer to Webster’s ideas and attempts to create a national culture in order to unify the states.

³ Rollins, “Words as Social Control,” 418.

⁴ Eve Kornfeld, *Creating an American Culture: 1775-1800, A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford St. Martin's, 2001), 19.

⁵ John S. Morgan, *Noah Webster* (New York: Mason Charter, 1975), 133.

As many historians and authors have argued, Noah Webster was undoubtedly influenced by the passions and feelings that existed after the War for Independence, along with many religious ideas. But, as his experiences and writings will show, these were not his primary reasons for his work. In the process of creating this first comprehensive American English dictionary, Webster used linguistics to change the mindset of Americans and set them on a course towards unity. Though Noah Webster's work with the American English language, especially his creation of *The American Dictionary of the English Language*, was influenced by his personality, his religious beliefs, and various societal ideas and values, the greatest factor was of his belief in the need for nationalism.

The Right Man for the Job

Before considering Noah Webster's motivations in creating *The American Dictionary of the English Language*, it is also important to note the personal attributes that made him so successful in this great undertaking. Though many men had ideas similar to Webster's, none followed through with them or carried them out with such determination and skill. Some of these attributes were God-given talents, but Webster's childhood and experiences as a young adult also played a large role in the lexicographer that he would become.

Noah Webster grew up as one of several children in a contented, well-respected farming family. Noah Webster's school days were instrumental in shaping his personality. Though he often missed school in order to work on his family's farm, he read enough to keep up with the other children and foster his love of the written word. He was always academically minded; his father soon recognized this when young Noah kept

disappearing to read for hours at a time. Hoping his son would be able to better himself, Noah Webster, Sr. permitted young Noah to continue his education. He began studying with Reverend Nathan Perkins at the age of fourteen in preparation for attending Yale.⁶ When he went to Yale, the year was 1774, and he was ultimately disappointed to find himself studying only classics rather than the works of Enlightenment philosophers that were shaping the world around him.⁷ Despite his success at Yale, after graduation Webster moved from job to job, never really settling into any of them. After his graduation from law school, he at first held only a variety of journalistic and teaching positions. During this time, teaching was anything but a lucrative position. Webster hardly had any money and he was not held in high esteem in the communities in which he taught. Despite these struggles, his experiences during this time—both good and bad—were to play a huge part in his later work. It was not until Webster began work on improving the American English language that he really found his calling.

After graduation and throughout his lifetime, Webster was a constant learner. Because of his academic achievements and natural intellectual bent, he had an incredible breadth of knowledge in addition to his excellence in investigating and defining words and etymologies.⁸ In fact, he was said to have mastered twenty-six languages in the course of his life, mostly while working on etymologies for his dictionary.⁹ Though the term “mastered” is almost surely an exaggeration, his devotion to the work is impressive.

⁶ Morgan, 7-8.

⁷ Joshua Kendall, *The Forgotten Founding Father: Noah Webster's Obsession and the Creation of an American Culture* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 2010), 30.

⁸ Morgan, 161.

⁹ Robert Keith Leavitt, *Noah's Ark, New England Yankees, and the Endless Quest* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1947), 28.

Webster undoubtedly had an analytical mind, though he was said to have had no real “literary sensibilities.”¹⁰ His “capacity for demanding scholarship”¹¹ certainly made up for shortcomings in any other area. From various accounts about Webster, it seems clear that he had what would now be diagnosed as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. With this information, it makes sense that “lexicography was a perfect fit for Webster’s personal ties.”¹² His obsession for his work caused him great physical and mental strain, especially because he often wrote standing up and paced as he thought.¹³ His OCD helped him complete the daunting and seemingly impossible task of writing by hand an entire dictionary.

From childhood, Webster also wrestled with mild anxiety issues, a common cause of OCD, which probably contributed to his antisocial tendencies as well. Because he was used to having emotional troubles and social anxiety, by the time he reached adulthood, “emotional setbacks resulted not in mourning, but in a ratcheting up of his fierce ambition.”¹⁴ He failed at many jobs before he achieved success and fame, so when the criticism of his work rained down, he was able to take it in stride. If anything, he used criticism to better his work. Harsh criticism may have prompted him to drop most of his extreme, early ideas, though he held firm in others. His determination only grew as the weight of his work grew.

Ever interested in language and words, he found his perfect career where his passion and his ability met. In lexicography he found “a sense of purpose” and a way to

¹⁰ Kendall, 101.

¹¹ Morgan, 161.

¹² Kendall, 72.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

calm his anxieties that made the grueling work worthwhile.¹⁵ In addition to his own betterment and sense of purpose, he also impacted the nation. Webster “believed fervently in his own mission to contribute to the future of the nation.”¹⁶ He gave his life to his work, and while he enjoyed it immensely, his motivations behind it all were bigger than himself.

A Biblical Perspective

Religion has always played a strong role in America’s history. Throughout exploration, colonization, and the creation of a new nation, Christianity has shaped the thoughts and actions of the people. Christianity—its principles and its practices—were common in households across the nation during Noah Webster’s life. Bible stories, proverbs, and morals were taught in public schools as a rule. In fact, shortly before he published his 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, both Webster and the nation experienced “a new burst of evangelical piety”¹⁷ in the form of the Second Great Awakening.

This Christian faith was another important factor in the life and work of Noah Webster. When Webster became a follower of Christ, he was already experimenting with spelling rules and working on textbooks for the schools of the new United States.¹⁸ His motivation for this type of work did not come from his desire to spread Christianity; however, his beliefs heightened his already existent talents and passions for language and education. His thoughts on the origin of language, its purpose, and its value were also

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 290.

¹⁶ Leavitt, 11.

¹⁷ Dorothy Ross, “Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America,” *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 4 (October 1984): 913.

¹⁸ Rollins, “Words as Social Control,” 113.

foundationally changed because of his biblical perspective. He knew it was not “a human construct” or “an artificial system of conventions fabricated to express truths.”¹⁹ He believed the Biblical truth that God created language especially for mankind. He already loved linguistics and was working towards his idea of nationalism, but after his conversion he felt an even stronger calling.

Evidence of religious influence appears throughout Webster’s works as a testimony to both his own beliefs and the values of the nation. The morality teachings in his spellers and readers demonstrate the social norms, as do many of his dictionary definitions.²⁰ Scholars, such as Rollins, believe that Webster’s motivations in compiling his dictionary were based more on his Christian faith and his desire to spread those ideas than anything else.²¹ It does seem to have been a natural outpouring of his personal beliefs, though it is doubtful that Webster’s main intentions were to spread the Christian beliefs that were already so prevalent in the new nation.

Not A Revolution

In order to understand the differences in meaning between the patriotism historians credit to Webster and the nationalism that actually drove his work, one must understand all the events up until this point. The Americans were extremely well off as British citizens. They had a great partnership, the benefits of which far exceeded economic ones. For almost 175 years, they were thoroughly British in their government, except in one

¹⁹ V. P. Bynack, "Noah Webster's Linguistic Thought and the Idea of an American National Culture," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45, no. 1 (January-March 1984): 112, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2709333?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents (accessed January 23, 2015).

²⁰ Rollins, "Words as Social Control," 422.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 430.

way.²² They had no representation in Parliament; they understood that their contract was directly with the King of England. No one seemed particularly bothered by this, and it caused no significant problems for over a century. In fact, the British officials in the colonies were rarely involved in local government. Shortly before the War for Independence broke out, however, Parliament clamped down on the colonies and began laying on heavy taxes. One historian, Charles M. Andrews, describes this conflict, saying that there was “no account of the growth to manhood” in the colonies.²³ Andrews believes that the British could have avoided the whole crisis if they had realized sooner that America was quickly outgrowing the normal bounds of colonialism. The British, not wishing to lose the wealth of resources that the Americans were providing, began grasping for more control, thereby taking away the great independence Americans had been enjoying for so long. In effect, in the War for Independence, the colonists were not fighting for a change in their government; they were fighting for what they had always had up until that point. Though many taxes, laws, and regulations were imposed on the colonies, the royal governors had not enforced most of them, resulting in “a large measure of self-government for the colonies.”²⁴ Because of the laxity with which they were initially treated, the colonies became accustomed to dealing with their own politics in their own way. When the British government began to interfere on a greater scale, it was only natural for the colonists to react strongly.

²² Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Background of the American Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1924), 3.

²³ Andrews, 66.

²⁴ Clinton Rossiter, *The First American Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1933), 108.

Even these reactions were not immediate; American colonists originally had no intentions of separating from England. In fact, when the taxes were levied, the first thing they asked for was representation in Parliament. They asked to become *more* British and *more* involved in British government. Secondly, it was a nearly impossible task for the Americans to pay such heavy taxes in cash. Until that time, most duties or payments for goods were exchanged through a bartering system. Because of the colonial and mercantile systems, the American colonists had very little actual money. It was “a commodity always scarce in the colonies,”²⁵ but now Britain was demanding it in bulk. It was not only unpleasant, the feat was likely impossible! These considerations put new meaning into the outrage displayed by the colonists.

Alexis de Tocqueville, observing several decades after the fact, said, “The revolution of the United States was the result of a mature and deliberate taste for freedom.”²⁶ It was not a social revolution; the Americans were not trying to make a statement. So, in essence, the Americans were actually not *revolting*; they were striving for *independence*. The fiercely patriotic, anti-British feelings simply did not exist as some historians tend to claim. Rather, many colonists viewed the United States as an improved form of the British government. Historian Clinton Rossiter also seems to realize that the colonists were not truly rebelling, but rather, preserving their independence. This sentiment is presented in the line, “Their revolution [was] ‘a parent to settlement, not a nursery of future revolutions.’ This was one colonial people that went to war for liberty knowing in

²⁵ Andrews, 134.

²⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Isaac Kramnick, trans. Henry Reeves (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 61.

its bones what liberty was.”²⁷ This is why some scholars prefer the term “War for Independence” over the misleading name “American Revolution.” The patriotism that many historians write about was deconstructive for the relationship between the United States and Great Britain; the nationalism that Noah Webster promoted was constructive for unity between the states. Among the American people, there was no desire to actually sever ties with Great Britain after the War for Independence. In fact, Webster’s proposed linguistic changes sparked concern that it would soon become difficult to communicate across the pond.

Noah’s desire for independence from England was clearly demonstrated when he tried to join the Continental Army along with his father and brothers, though he never actually saw battle.²⁸ Webster would have first encountered these nationalistic feelings from an intellectual standpoint at Yale.²⁹ It became a subject of his writings, and as his career progressed, Webster began lecturing “on a variety of subjects—usually language or American nationalism.”³⁰ He understood that those two subjects were critical to each other; but “furthermore, he saw how his ideas for a national government dovetailed with those for education and language to forge a stronger national identity.”³¹

The Disunited States

The best way to understand how nationalism affected Webster’s work, and vice versa, is to understand what patriotism and nationalism meant at this time—and what they did not mean. There were very few patriotic extremists who actually wanted to cut

²⁷ Rossiter, 239.

²⁸ Morgan, 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

all relations with Great Britain. These people really did want to change the language and the culture to rid themselves of any British influence. In contrast, those who were actually influential in the linguistic and cultural separation from Britain acted in this way in order to keep the new nation together. There were tensions between the two countries, of course, after the death and destruction caused by the war. At the same time, these post-war tensions were not the reason for Webster's desire for cultural separation.

After the War for Independence, the United States was governed by a document called the Articles of Confederation. Webster criticized the Articles of Confederation harshly for their shortcomings.³² It was clear that they were not going to be able to withstand the test of time because of the lack of centralized power. Under this government, the individual states had more power than the Federal government. These separate centers of power, added to the differences already existent between the states, made for a tense situation. There was a stark contrast, especially between the northern and southern states. Those "religious, ethnic, class, and racial tensions, long simmering in the middle and southern colonies, bubbled to the surface during the war."³³ As the United States developed, the world watched to see if the American Experiment would truly succeed.

Suddenly uniting thirteen independent colonies was a move certain to cause problems. The economic and social differences in the states made them hesitant to work together or submit themselves to a larger governing body. In addition to these divisions, there was also significant linguistic disparity between various regions of the country.

³² Morgan, 83.

³³ Kornfeld, 5.

Noah Webster saw the divisions, especially regarding spelling and vocabulary. His way of keeping the nation together, or at least giving her a better chance at survival, was to unify the language. In his writings he repeatedly called for “an independent American culture.”³⁴ Culture is what unites people, and one of the most important parts of culture is language. Webster traveled to promote his spellers and textbooks, and as he journeyed, “he was impressed with the inconsistencies of English spelling and their hindrance to the learner of the language.”³⁵ He knew that if it continued, the country could end up with hundreds of local dialects, which would work against the nation’s good. All the hopes and dreams for the new nation would be undermined if her people could not even communicate amongst themselves. It became apparent that “only a national culture could give Americans a sense of identity and unity.”³⁶ So in this respect, being nationalistic was simply practical.

Some national leaders, such as George Washington, also worried about the effect of the increasing immigration on language. They were afraid that the influx of new cultures and languages would destroy the weak American culture.³⁷ Webster thought it crucial to “seize the present moment, and establish a *national* language, as well as a national government.”³⁸ “The unifying agents that America lacked in the 1780s were,” as Morgan states, “a national language, the institution of schools and a national government. Webster set about to establish all three.”³⁹ Webster’s nationalism focused on the problem

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁵ Leavitt, 14.

³⁶ Kornfeld, 3.

³⁷ Morgan, 99.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

of linguistic disparity between the states in an effort to overcome the many other differences between them.

Practical Linguistics

Noah Webster had definite motivations for his work with the American English language. Beyond his talents, passions, religious beliefs, and patriotic spirit there was a more immediate reason that led him to create his life's work. Noah Webster knew that there were numerous tensions and divisions that threatened to tear apart the new nation. Webster knew from personal experience that regional differences in spelling and pronunciation were just one more divisive factor on top of all the others. He engineered his dictionary specifically to counteract this national trait. Webster saw and experienced the language issues; he had the ability and determination to make a change; he successfully altered the speaking and writing habits of the nation; and he wrote explicitly about his reasons for doing so.

Webster had experience in American classrooms both as a student and a teacher. He had struggled while learning to read because of an incompetent teacher. Because of the low wages and little respect they earned, the worst issue in American schools at this time "was the caliber of the teachers, whom Webster would later describe as the 'dregs' of humanity."⁴⁰ The majority of the textbooks Webster used as a child were British. The teachers managed with these books when the states were still colonies and they still taught British history, geography, and literature. Once the United States became independent, however, it began creating its own history and developing its own culture, and these textbooks simply did not meet the educational needs of the new nation.

⁴⁰ Kendall, 18.

As a schoolteacher, Webster was frustrated with the state of education he saw around himself. While teaching, he noted the quality and content of the textbooks and spellers that the American children were using. Most of them still featured British geography and historical figures, which were not of much immediate value to these children, who needed to be learning about their own nation. He knew what the children struggled with and the unnecessary information that they were learning. He had a passion to change the system and allow the children to learn English grammar and spelling easily, along with other subjects relevant to them. During this time, he began creating his own lessons, which eventually developed into full textbooks and spellers.

Webster originally tried to separate American English very decisively from British English. He saw many faults in the British methods of spelling and pronunciation. He “recogni[zed] that many British spelling conventions were needlessly confusing,”⁴¹ and he saw how British spelling and pronunciation varied from region to region. In a small island nation like Great Britain, such differences can be overcome. In the United States, a nation with so much potential for expansion, such differences would be a roadblock for communication and might even cause division in the country. He hoped to make American English “free from the regional variations in pronunciation and usage that plagued English in the mother country.”⁴²

Throughout his early professional life, Webster realized how inconsistent the pronunciations and spellings of American English were becoming. Even more important

⁴¹ Randy Cervený, "Noah Webster: Lexicographer, Climatologist," *Weatherwise* 62, no. 4 (July/August 2009): 39.

⁴² Dennis Baron, *The English-Only Question: An Official Language for Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 43.

than these issues were the growing differences between British and American vocabulary. The British dictionaries no longer did justice to the American tongue. As new words, termed “Americanisms,” began to develop and become incorporated into daily speech, no official rules or grammar guidelines were established. The Americans were borrowing words from the Native Americans, the Spanish, and the French. In the typical manner of the English language, they leached off of other languages. Not only were new words being added, but their usage and prevalence also differed depending on geography, making it difficult for anyone to keep track of them all. These differences went unaddressed because there was no “clear literary, social, or intellectual center of American authority”⁴³ until Webster came along.

Besides the new words and meanings that were developing, “spelling in late eighteenth-century America was a casual affair, even for the well educated.”⁴⁴ Before Webster, “Americans had few, if any, rules to follow when it came to spelling even the simplest of words. Phonetic spelling was the law of the land.”⁴⁵ For example, “town” could correctly be spelled as any of the following: town, towne, toune, towwen.⁴⁶ This obviously could cause problems in communication; it also looked very disorganized and careless. Most of the people in favor of Webster’s unification of American English

⁴³ Tim Cassedy, “‘A Dictionary which we do Not Want’: Defining America Against Noah Webster, 1783-1810,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (April 2014): 244.

⁴⁴ Morgan, 46.

⁴⁵ Jack North Conway, *American Literacy: Fifty Books that Define our Culture and Ourselves* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1993), 46.

⁴⁶ Conway, 46.

“wanted people from other nations to respect then [sic], not to laugh at their inability to spell their own language.”⁴⁷

During his book promotion tours, Webster traveled quite a bit around his New England home and also into the South several times.⁴⁸ As he interacted with people from different regions, he realized the pronunciation differences between the South, the West (now the Midwest), and his own New England states. He became afraid that different areas of the nation would soon be speaking entirely distinctive languages.⁴⁹ He was not the only one who believed that something must be done about this problem. He discussed his ideas with other prominent figures such as George Washington, who even tried to hire him as a tutor for his step-grandchildren. John Adams and Benjamin Franklin also proposed various language revisions and talked of establishing an official authority on the matter.⁵⁰ This included Adams’ “proposal for an American Language Academy . . . for fixing and improving their proper languages.”⁵¹ Webster took these suggestions to heart as he conversed and consulted with various national leaders throughout the course of his work.

Webster’s Success

Webster’s commitment to the cause of unifying the nation can be seen by the drastic measures he takes in his linguistic reforms in the beginning. His first attempts at language reforms were a bit overbearing. He oversimplified vowel sounds and cut out

⁴⁷ Morgan, 46.

⁴⁸ Cassedy, 254.

⁴⁹ Kendall, 260.

⁵⁰ Kendall, 4.

⁵¹ Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1852), 7:249-251. Quoted in James Crawford, ed., *Language Loyalties: A Source Book on the Official English Controversy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 31.

what he considered to be unnecessary letters. He was willing to completely reinvent the spelling system and revise phonetic spellings in order to unite the nation; however, for a nation to totally relearn spelling and grammar rules would have been impractical.

Webster realized this eventually when the American people criticized and mocked him. He mellowed his approach and “gradually abandoned most of his reforms,”⁵² mostly because people were afraid that American and British English “might become mutually unintelligible.”⁵³ His collaborators reminded him of the havoc he would create in “upsetting the established spelling order.”⁵⁴ The changes that were actually instituted were gradually introduced with little upset, and to this day, distinguish American spelling from the British.⁵⁵

Some historians say Webster’s biggest accomplishment in regard to spelling was eliminating silent letters.⁵⁶ Because of Noah Webster, Americans spell “theater” instead of “theatre” and “honor” rather than “honour.”⁵⁷ These, and a few others, are the reforms that have endured throughout the centuries. Though a few spelling rules differentiate Americans from the British, the biggest differences are indeed vocabulary and borrowed words. These vocabulary differences are certainly “more substantial, but ultimately superficial in that they do not prevent the American and British versions of English being

⁵² Morgan, 105.

⁵³ Cassedy, 242.

⁵⁴ Morgan, 105.

⁵⁵ Morgan, 46.

⁵⁶ Marilyn Vos Savant, *The Art of Spelling: The Madness and the Method* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 84.

⁵⁷ Noah Webster, *A Dictionary of the English Language: Abridged from the American Dictionary, for Use of Primary Schools and the Counting House* (New York: F. J. Huntington & Co., 1837), iii.

unquestionably the same language.”⁵⁸ Overall, Webster did not actually change the structure of the English language very significantly; and his greatest feat was not the change he forced, but rather the change he foresaw and for which he made allowance.

Webster believed that “usage should determine the rules of speech.”⁵⁹ English is fluid; its meanings “shift and change in response to the pressures of common usage rather than the dictates of committees.”⁶⁰ It is a language of the people. The British are renowned for this feat of creating and shaping new words. In fact, Shakespeare may have been the greatest of “word-benders, showing everyone how to be daring in the use of words.”⁶¹ In his work, Webster did not diminish this quality; rather he enforced it. He added new Americanisms to his dictionary. Every edition had new words, because “by the time he finished each volume in his series the language had changed. New words [were] coined; words chang[ed] in meaning; other words disappear[ed].”⁶² Every edition also tweaked definitions to fit with the national mind. Webster knew that language, though it should always be uniform across the nation, would also be ever changing. Part of this process of change included cutting out old words—words that harkened back to “feudal and hierarchical establishments of England . . . [which were] utterly extinct”⁶³ in the United States. This is why language changed so much, and why it worked so well in a nation that was becoming thoroughly democratic in every other way. Webster’s work

⁵⁸ James Essinger, *Spellbound: The Surprising Origins and Astonishing Secrets of English Spelling* (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2007), 263.

⁵⁹ Kendall, 85.

⁶⁰ Stephanie Hackert, “Linguistic Nationalism and the Emergence of the English Native Speaker,” *European Journal of English Studies* 13, no. 3 (December 2009): 309.

⁶¹ David Crystal, *The Story of English in 100 Words* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011), xiii.

⁶² Morgan, 161.

⁶³ Cassedy, 230.

with the American English dictionary continued the tradition of a democratic and flexible English language.

Noah Webster's *Compendious Dictionary* of 1806 was the first to include Americanisms, or words specific to the U.S.⁶⁴ As David Crystal explains, "English is a vacuum-cleaner of a language, whose users suck in words from other languages whenever they encounter them."⁶⁵ Webster's dictionary is a great example of this process. With each edition printed, Webster added technical and monetary terms, as well as Native American or other foreign words.⁶⁶ At first, many of these words originated when "the early explorers began to use words from American Indian languages, and these along with many others helped to develop an American identity."⁶⁷ These changes are absolutely necessary in a newly birthed nation. The new terms and meanings reflect the "new circumstances, new modes of life, new laws, new ideas of various kinds."⁶⁸ It only makes sense that a new nation would need a new dictionary, even though it retains the fundamental language of its mother country. These changes established American culture and language as unique, and gave the states a common culture to rally around.

Webster's approach to language was also democratic in another way. He did not want it to be socially hierarchical. He believed everyone, of every region and every class, should speak the same way.⁶⁹ Likewise, John Adams, believing American English would be the next world language, said, "In a democracy like the United States, excellence in the

⁶⁴ Crystal, 151.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁶⁶ Morgan, 160.

⁶⁷ Crystal, xvi.

⁶⁸ Kendall, 260.

⁶⁹ Cassedy, 247.

use of the English language, rather than accidents of birth and class, would serve to distinguish merit.”⁷⁰ Though this concept reflects American ideals, Webster’s execution of the idea showed significant bias and therefore received proper criticism.

As it was, Noah Webster’s standard American English was really just based on New England pronunciations and definitions.⁷¹ He unashamedly favored New England with his linguistic work. He did so because he believed that “little learning in America occurred outside of New England.”⁷² Though he succeeded in unifying the states through a distinct American culture, he may have also contributed to feelings of superiority throughout the North and parallel feelings of inferiority and bitterness throughout the South. Despite this issue, Webster still established a much-needed “standard for American speech, history, and morality,”⁷³ which largely still exists today. This is why his dictionary is the most important of his accomplishments. With its creation came the feeling of a national language and therefore, a national culture.

In His Own Words

Noah Webster clearly had experience dealing with the shortcomings of American culture and linguistic practices. Because of his talents and personality, he was able to carry his great plans of promoting national unity to fruition. In his speeches and prefaces to his many works, he does not shy away from addressing his motivations. His comments about American language and culture clearly show his intentions of helping to unify the nation.

⁷⁰ Baron, 28.

⁷¹ Kornfeld, 26.

⁷² Kendall, 113.

⁷³ Kornfeld, 79.

When Webster expressed the idea that “a future separation of the American tongue from the English [was] necessary and unavoidable,” he recognized the practicality of having a national authority on language.⁷⁴ Vocabulary and pronunciation were changing and evolving more quickly than ever, but the core structure of the language was not. Webster wanted an educated, unified nation because, “it is scarcely possible for an enlightened people to succumb to tyranny.”⁷⁵ The so-called “struggle for cultural independence from Great Britain”⁷⁶ was nothing more than a survival tactic. The fear was that if the states broke up, they would quickly be taken advantage of by other nations who coveted their land and resources. Webster realized that “nothing but the establishment of schools and some uniformity in the use of books, can annihilate differences in speaking and preserve the purity of the American tongue.”⁷⁷ To avoid division, the United States needed to quickly formalize and standardize their use of language. Noah Webster had great plans for his work. “North America will be peopled with a hundred millions of men, *all speaking the same language*,” Webster envisioned.⁷⁸

“American independence would not be complete,” Webster believed, “until Americans began to speak and write in a language of their own.”⁷⁹ In other words, once the Americans had their own nation, they must also have their own culture. This would include literature, history, art, and, of course, language. It was important that the people

⁷⁴ Morgan, 118.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁷⁶ E. Jennifer Monaghan, *A Common Heritage: Noah Webster's Blue-Back Speller* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1983), 38.

⁷⁷ Noah Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language: With Notes, Historical and Critical* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and Company, 1789), 18.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷⁹ Kornfeld, 20.

feel like a nation and have pride in that fact, because “a sense of nationality is vital to the preservation of unity.”⁸⁰ The printed word was the greatest force in fostering unity between the regions—especially in the form of newspapers and books, which “stimulated intercolonial communication.”⁸¹ Noah Webster’s contributions of textbooks, spellers, and dictionaries went far in establishing a sense of unity amongst students, educators, and anyone else who dealt with the written word.

The changes Webster made to the language in turn changed the mindset of Americans and “spread a new apparatus of thought and feeling.”⁸² The new culture that Webster helped to shape became thoroughly American. The new words symbolized the new relationships with the Native Americans, the new inventions that were being created in this fertile land, and the new political principles that were evolving. Webster’s work, especially his dictionary, also reflected social changes in the new United States—such as immigration.⁸³ American English was for the new nation and none other.

Because of Webster’s work, “American’s speech habits are fixed despite the wide geographic diversity of the nation and the un-English background of many of its inhabitants.”⁸⁴ Before technology and media developed and spread in the 20th century, this type of national unity of language was rarely found outside of the United States.⁸⁵ In fact, in many large countries today there are still several dialects and little linguistic unity,

⁸⁰ Morgan, 144.

⁸¹ K. M. Elisabeth Murray, *Caught in the Web of Words: James Murray and the Oxford English Dictionary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 142.

⁸² Cassedy, 244.

⁸³ Neil Larry Shumsky, “Noah Webster and the Invention of Immigration,” *New England Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (March 2008): 128.

⁸⁴ Morgan, 53.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

making it difficult to communicate and carry out business. Webster saw the problems in Europe amongst the “nations, whose knowledge and intercourse are embarrassed by differences of language.”⁸⁶ He realized this when he wrote, “Although perfect uniformity in speaking, is not probably attainable in any living language, yet it is to be wished that the youth of our country may be, as little as possible, perplexed with various differing systems and standards.”⁸⁷ His foresight in this area ultimately contributed not only to the unity, but also to the economic stability and world power status of the nation.

Webster also knew that a well-educated country was more likely to function well and overcome differences. He saw that “the health and safety of the new nation depended upon an enlightened citizenry, which in turn depended on a general diffusion of knowledge.”⁸⁸ This could not be accomplished without a central authority on the matter. His speller and dictionaries would “create a standard American speech that would serve as a unifying force in the Republic.”⁸⁹ In doing this, he created a national culture. “Webster viewed education—specifically language and spelling—as part of nation-building,” which is why he “was determined that American schoolchildren learn about American authors and heroes.”⁹⁰ By doing this he successfully “wean[ed] our people from their . . . confidence in English authority.”⁹¹ This was necessary in order to gain respect among world powers. “What would European nations think of this country if, after the

⁸⁶ Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language*, 21.

⁸⁷ Noah Webster, *The American Spelling Book: Containing the Rudiments of the English Language, for the Use of Schools in the United States* (New-Brunswick, N.J.: Terhune & Letson, 1831), vi.

⁸⁸ Monaghan, 12.

⁸⁹ Monaghan, 13.

⁹⁰ Laura Wolff Scanlan, “Better Living through Spelling,” *Humanities* 31, no. 2 (March/April 2010): 8.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

exhibition of great talents and achievements in the war for independence, we should send to Europe for men to teach the first rudiments of learning?" Webster asked.⁹² Soon his own work was recognized internationally as it contributed to America's unity and success on the world stage.

By the end of his career, he was known throughout the Western world. Held in high regard by all, his *American Dictionary of the English Language* became an international standard. There was nothing to equal it at the time, and it was "taken as the leading authority on the meaning of words, not only in America and England, but also throughout the Far East."⁹³ This dictionary, created almost entirely by his own hand, crushed the nearest competition, being "double the size of Johnson's, with 78,000 headwords [and] 1,600 pages."⁹⁴ Other lexicographers had created American dictionaries, but scholars credit Webster with "forever expanding the scope of the dictionary."⁹⁵ When he added the new Americanisms that had developed or been borrowed from other languages, he included those that referred to everyday life. Previously, it was common for dictionaries to include only those words that had political, social, or literary value.⁹⁶ To an educator like Webster, who wanted the dictionary to be used in all academic, business, and household settings, this exclusion of the most common words made little sense. He constantly strove to institute practical changes that would unify the entire nation.

⁹² Kendall, 4.

⁹³ Stuart A. P. Murray, *The Library: An Illustrated History* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2009), 133.

⁹⁴ Simon Winchester, *The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 35.

⁹⁵ Kendall, 342.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 342.

What Webster accomplished was astounding. Historian Eve Kornfeld said of him, “Few of his fellow intellectuals could claim as much success in shaping American culture.”⁹⁷ Kornfeld is suggesting that the other Founding Fathers, though they laid the groundwork, did not do as much for the unity and culture of America as Webster did. Some national leaders proposed similar ideas to Webster; some even collaborated with him. None of these men ever saw their plans to fruition like Webster did. Webster’s speller “was the first American best-seller,”⁹⁸ and “it taught generations of Americans a uniform spelling and fairly consistent manner of pronunciation.”⁹⁹ Webster’s work to educate, not just schoolchildren, but an entire nation, rightfully earned him the title “America’s Schoolteacher.”

Conclusion

Noah Webster’s desire for a practical and standardized way of speaking and writing in America is evidenced by many of his own works. He consistently mentions his desire for a united nation and his concern for the tensions between the states. While his personality, his religion, and his contemporary culture played major roles in these desires and concerns, this passion for nationalism was his main motivation. The goal of his linguistic work was to create feelings of nationalism that would unify the states despite their differences. His impact upon the nation can still be felt today in the differences between British and American English, the scope of dictionaries, the unity of the United States, and the nation’s quick rise to power and international respect.

⁹⁷ Kornfeld, 19.

⁹⁸ Morgan, 43.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

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